# FOR SUCH A TIME

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## ONE

# Matthew's Quartet

### *Four Scandalous Women*

But where to start?

I began with Matthew's gospel, because Matthew first drew my attention to the importance of biblical women. He begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus, but it's a singular genealogy because it includes four women. That's remarkable in itself. But when you examine *who* they are, it becomes even more so. These are not just any women. Matthew does not include Sarah, Abraham's wife; nor did he include any of the first three patriarchs' wives. He does not include Eve, for his genealogy only goes back to Abraham. He does not include any of these obvious candidates. So whom did he include?

First, in this genealogy of the Messiah, Matthew mentions Tamar. Even in our day, when sexual matters are discussed quite openly, the story of Tamar—a woman who disguises herself as a prostitute and convinces her father-in-law to buy sex from her—gives us pause. It certainly must have made Matthew's audience uncomfortable!

But then he follows up with Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho. When we tell her story to children, we describe Rahab as an innkeeper. But the context and vocabulary in the book of Joshua are clear, and five other Old Testament passages refer to her as a prostitute. Rahab was *not* just an innkeeper. That occasions more discomfort.

Next, Matthew mentions Ruth. Finally, we come to a story with which we are comfortable. Well, mostly comfortable, that is, because there are parts of the story that we tone down a bit. We don't mention the strong prohibition God had given Israel against marrying foreigners, especially those from Moab. There

are several reasons for this discomfort with Moab, and they are quite deserved. Now we have three women, each one of them with serious questions about why they were allowed to marry into Israel and bear a child who would become an ancestor of royalty. But Matthew has not yet finished shocking us.

It would be difficult to imagine a more scandalous woman than Bathsheba. The story of David and Bathsheba reads like a soap opera. Nudity, adultery, betrayal, conspiracy, murder—and that's just the beginning.

That is Matthew's quartet of female ancestors of Christ—four women, all with questionable pasts. This brings us back to the question, Why? Why did Matthew include these, and *only* these, women? Why does he insist on focusing our attention on these four difficult situations? Aside from being ancestors of Jesus, what do these four women have in common? After all, in forty-two generations, there had to be forty-two wives and mothers. Yet Matthew mentions only these four. What is Matthew trying to tell his readers? And why did God allow these women to become part of the royal line, and even ancestors, of Christ?

They come from different backgrounds. Three are Gentiles. One was an adulteress, another was a prostitute, and yet another pretended to be a prostitute. Indeed, persuading her own father-in-law to pay her for sex is how she became part of this genealogy! Three are widows—although one became a widow only after committing adultery, when her adulterous lover conspired to murder her first husband.

These women are anything but ordinary. They do not fit our image of the "perfect woman." They were not the timid little "fruitful vine[s] in the corner of the house"—the psalmist's idea of a good spouse. They had little in common with the "ideal woman" pictured in Proverbs 31, except for one crucial characteristic—*initiative*. They became ancestors of Christ because they seized or created an opportunity, took the initiative, and acted—often contrary to male desires and expectations. And yet God honored these women as only He could—by including them in the Messianic line.

These four women formed the starting point for my study. As we go through this roll call of heroines, we shall see again and again that the biblical authors have structured these tales in such a way as to make it clear how their experience parallels that of the significant men who played crucial roles in God's plans—such spiritual giants as Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Samuel, Solomon, Peter, Paul, and John the revelator.

Perhaps that strikes you as a little far-fetched. I understand that, and I sympathize. As I studied one woman after another the story of each one contained surprising details I had never noticed before, the evidence kept piling up. The biblical authors delight in showing us that the God of old, who performed wonders and saving actions in Israel's past, is active in their own time, and in the same way. They do this by repeating words, settings, circumstances, patterns, or sequences of events that recall the earlier episodes. All this was designed to help

their audience—and eventually us—maintain and deepen our faith in God.

Some may object to the idea that human authors took so active a role in fashioning the biblical narratives. I confess that the idea that biblical authors were actively shaping what they wrote at first made me uncomfortable. When I was growing up, I thought that the biblical authors, especially the authors of the four Gospels, were essentially inspired stenographers—that they simply wrote down everything that happened. But John, in his Gospel, laid that idea to rest.

"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30, 31).

John not only tells us that he did not write the other signs that Jesus performed, but explains how he decided which ones to include. He selected the ones that would help us believe. Indeed, more of Jesus' actions were unrecorded than the total that were included in all the Gospels. Again, John explains: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

John explicitly declared the purpose of his book and explains how he decided which episodes to include in it, but most of the biblical authors do not. We have to deduce their purpose and method of selection. Still, every biblical author picked and chose, including some episodes and words, and excluded others, arranging them to emphasize some details while omitting others. He repeats phrases, and he compares and contrasts characters, events, and words. He names some characters that he describes and leaves others unnamed. In scores of little ways, the author shapes his tale to communicate the wonder of how God relates to deeply flawed human beings.

Does this idea somehow diminish the role of inspiration in writing the Bible? Not at all. As Peter testified: "Prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

The Spirit "carried the prophets along," but *they* spoke. They spoke their words, in their language, to an audience steeped in their common culture. Having been entrusted with God's message for His people, they bent every effort to effectively communicate that message. As we study these stories, we shall discover the reason Matthew included those four questionable women in Jesus' genealogy. But that is for later—when we study a fifth woman.

For now, we begin where Matthew began. We begin with the first woman in Matthew's genealogy and the first woman in Scripture who seizes the initiative and receives God's approval for doing so—even though, in this case, she does it in an unusual way, and decidedly without the permission of the man supposedly in charge of her. We begin with Tamar.